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LEAVE FOR PROFESSIONAL IMPROVEMENT

C. B. Smith



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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Washington, D. C.

Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics

Extension Service Circular 116

November, 1929.

LEAVE FOR PROFESSIONAL IMPROVEMENT*

C. B. Smith,
Chief, Office of Cooperative Extension Work

The business of county agents is the business of giving--giving of their knowledge, giving of their skill, of their training--giving to the utmost. A whole county of farm people, 2,000 or more families on the average, look to the county agent for counsel and advice on every known subject.

County agents are limited in their training. Taking all the county agents, both men and women, in 16 States as a sample of the whole United States and examining into the training of each, we find that 69.3 per cent have a bachelor's degree; 3.2 the master's degree; and 3 per cent the doctor's degree; 18 per cent have only limited college training; and 9 per cent no college training. There is thus a total of around 27 per cent that have had limited college or no college training.

What farmer or farm family these days does not consult the county agent on new crops, new methods, new organizations, the rejuvenation of old associations, when to market, how to analyze their business, how to budget, to what college Mary or John shall be sent, how to obtain crop insurance, what real value has the purebred, and a thousand other farm and home matters.

Each day the county agents are sounded and plumbed to their depths and their well of knowledge drawn upon to the limit. That they feel the need of going up to the university from time to time to replenish their stock of knowledge and refresh their souls goes without saying and needs no long-drawn-out argument here.

*An address delivered at the convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Chicago, Ill., November 12 to 14, 1929.

DISTRIBUTION: A copy of this circular has been sent to each director of extension, State agricultural college library, State experiment station library, and bureau chief.

For the purpose of emphasis, and perhaps action on the part of the colleges, also, we propose in this paper to invite your attention to a single phase of professional improvement in which agricultural agents need further professional training. And that is in the field of agricultural economics.

Our reports show that, notwithstanding the desire of farmers for years for help in the field of agricultural economics, we have been giving them on the whole an average of but 4 per cent of the time of county agents and specialists, covering more particularly farm management, marketing, and rural credit as specific projects. Ninety-six per cent of the time of these agents for the past five years appears to have been given to production and miscellaneous matters.

The report of the county agents for 1928 shows that, out of about 2,400 county agricultural agents employed, but 1,144--less than half--gave any attention to farm management; only 73 gave attention to farm credits; but 1,027 out of the 2,400 gave attention to cooperative marketing. We have no record as to how many may have given assistance to the farmer in crop and stock insurance, farm taxation, and like matters, but from our general observation in the field we know there were not many.

In the use of agricultural outlook material, we find that, although the Federal Department of Agriculture and some of the State agricultural colleges have been getting out this material for the past six years, supplemented by intentions to plant and breed data and information on price trends, hardly more than one county agent in three or one extension specialist in three in 1929 used that data with their farmers or took any substantial part in its dissemination.

A few of the States--not more than can be numbered on the fingers of both hands--are doing magnificent work in some phases of the field of agricultural economics. At least 50 per cent of our States, however, are engaged only haltingly in this field.

Now, into this situation has come the Federal Farm Board. That board proposes to do its extension work through the cooperative extension system. The board is placing emphasis at this time on cooperative marketing. As time goes on, it will undoubtedly give attention to the various other fields of agricultural economics.

A suitable land policy, efficiency in the operation and management of farms, adjustments in taxation, credit at costs that are reasonable, the proper insurance of the various farm enterprises, and like matters must all be given consideration. The board is already laying emphasis on agricultural outlook and intentions to plant and breed material.

The Farm Board is the last word of the nation in its efforts to aid the farmer, and we will be expected and will desire to cooperate with them in all phases of their extension work, and if extension forces are to serve the farmer in most useful measure at this time and carry out the extension program of the Farm Board, county agents and specialists must enter still more largely into the economic field than has been the case up to now.

And why haven't the county agents and extension specialists undertaken more work in the economic field during the past 15 years? In the face of the farmer's solicitation and urge, why have so many hesitated? The fault would seem to go back to our colleges of agriculture. Most of the colleges have failed to give the county agents adequate training to make the agents feel sufficient confidence in themselves to advise the farmer in the economic field.

The county agent has been put out in the county and told to make good. He has emphasized in his work the things he was taught and knew best. That has been largely in the field of production. He has succeeded so well in this field that it is now possible to produce each year more of practically any commodity than the nations will take and pay a reasonable price for. In fact, the real problem now with many commodities is to restrain rather than to accelerate production. With production in some degree met, the time has come to give more attention to economics if we are to serve the farmer and the public in the most effective way.

In many States, in the economic field, we have got to begin almost at the beginning. In fully 40 per cent of our States, we have weak, inadequate departments or no departments of agricultural economics for satisfactory research, teaching, and extension. The college of agriculture would seem the place to begin. That agricultural college is not living up to its opportunities that is not doing substantial and vital research in the various fields of agricultural economics, upon which data, plus the accumulated wisdom from other sources, it can base a sound economic teaching and extension program. Research and teaching constitute the beginning that should not be delayed in any institution longer than it must be delayed to find or to train teachers and leaders for the work.

Meanwhile, the field is wide. The Farm Board is here. Extension is called upon to give service in the economic field now. Only part of our forces are adequately trained for the work. What are we to do? This seems like a case where vital professional improvement is involved.

Moreover, we must recognize at the outset that it is not a case of taking on just one more man or two more men in the whole broad field of economics but rather of training a number of men for the various fields of economics. Also, it is not practicable for every county agent to get away to college, even if he had the desire to do it. Training will have to be given most of them, therefore, where they are. We have got to take the college and knowledge and help to them in the field and build up in the

county agents confidence so that in future they can handle economic information as they handle production. This will probably have to be done through the aid of economic extension specialists, through short courses held at the college from time to time for extension forces, and through granting to the county agents some form of Sabbatic leave. It would seem that the colleges that failed to give these agents a working knowledge in agricultural economics when they were students at the college are under strong obligation to be liberal in helping them to obtain additional training now that the agents have become representatives of the college in the counties and are being solicited for help by farmers in connection with all phases of agricultural economics.

To build up the county agents in the economic field so that they can function, most of our extension services are in need of economic extension specialists, to be put on slowly, only as fast as they can be trained, along each of the following lines:

- (1) Extension specialists who can help to educate producers in the principles underlying our economic life; help them to recognize that there are forces at work which they must take into account in their business; get them to see that they must reckon with competition locally, nationally, and internationally; get them to realize that supply and demand determine, in the main, prices at which the products can be sold.
- (2) Extension specialists who can help county agents in the development of fundamentally sound county, community, and farm and home programs, men who can analyze the farm business and point out its strong and weak features--teach the use of outlook material as a basis for a sound productive program--extension specialists in farm management.
- (3) Extension specialists in marketing, and especially cooperative marketing--some one to teach the principles and give counsel in the organization of small associations and the coordination into larger groups, so that the farmer can handle his own business in a large, efficient way--some one to teach the importance and use of the monthly price outlook reports, the market news information service, and other like information.
- (4) Economist in the use of money and credit in farming, crop and stock insurance, and help in understanding the system and principles of farm taxation and land utilization. We are giving little and, in most States, practically no help in these fields, but the need of the farmer for such help is great.

We can not start in all these fields at once. Even if the extension services had the funds, the men competently trained for the work are not available. Each State has got to undertake the training, the professional improvement, of its own leaders. It is not so much an emergency as it is a long-time program. Nothing is gained by trying to get a supply from some other State which is likewise without adequate help.

The suggestion has been made that, in developing men for the various fields of agricultural economics, each director look over his own staff, both of specialists and county agents, and encourage one of them who has shown outstanding interest and ability in any phase of agricultural economics to take a year off and go to the best college or university he can find for further instruction in economics. Then the director should bring him back to the college as an extension specialist at a sufficient increase in salary to make it a good financial investment for the agent or specialist to have taken the additional study.

The candidate for such additional professional training would by preference go to his own State university for such training, but, if that university does not have strong work in economics, the candidate should be left free to go to any one of a dozen universities in the country that do have strong courses.

Again, the extension director, backed by the college, should encourage every county agricultural agent to take his Sabbatic leave when due and further to fit himself in the field in which he is weakest. Just now that field, for most agents, is in the various phases of agricultural economics.

The title of my paper does not limit me to any particular phase of professional training for extension. I might have discussed the whole broad field. I have purposely limited myself at this time to the one field where it appears to me the greatest need for professional improvement lies.

The following table gives you an analysis of the professional training of a representative group of our cooperative extension forces as they appear on the appointment requests you have sent in. You can analyze them as well as I.

Educational training of extension agents in 16 States

	: County	: Home	: Boys' and	:
	: agricultural	: demonstration	: girls' club	: Specialists
	: agents	: agents	: agents	:
Total number	: 302	: 347	: 68	: 384
B. S. degree, percentage	: 74.6	: 61.1	: 54.5	: 69.0
M. S. degree, "	: 4.1	: 1.4	: 1.4	: 15.0
Doctor's degree, "	: .1	: .9	: -----	: 1.6
Limited college, "	: 11.6	: 28.6	: 36.8	: 12.7
No college, "	: 9.6	: 8.0	: 7.3	: 1.6

In closing, I would leave in your minds the following thoughts:

- (1) Extension should, as promptly as possible, go more largely and vigorously into the economic field if we are best to serve the farmers' interests.
- (2) Our extension agents have only in part been trained in economic work, and practically all need professional improvement in this field.
- (3) The undertaking of economic extension work can not be gone into hurriedly without more harm than good. It would seem to be a case of making haste slowly. It is a long-time program.
- (4) As regards the immediate future in extension, it would seem desirable to hand-pick promising county extension agents, encourage them to take postgraduate work in some phase of agricultural economics for a year at their own expense, and bring them back to the college as extension economists at sufficiently large increase in salary to make the work of the year a good financial investment for such agents.
- (5) Of fundamental importance in the long-time program is the need for the agricultural college--every one in the United States--to develop strong departments of economics, based on researches in farm management, farm taxation, cooperative organizations, land utilization, etc., in their own State, so that they may teach the students vital facts in the State's agriculture and better fit them to become extension agents.
- (6) Extension directors who use the product of the colleges may well urge this need upon the colleges for men better trained in economics.
- (7) Finally, the State colleges should be most liberal in granting leave of absence to extension workers for professional training and go as far as they can in helping finance each case or making it worth the while of the agent to take the additional training through an increase in salary upon his return to work.

If we are going to build up a strong extension force that meets expectations in these times of agricultural efficiency of the farmers, a force that has knowledge and courage and whose counsel is sound; if we are going to build up morale and satisfaction in the force, we must provide a way for its growth. Extension agents will gladly do the economic work when they have the economic knowledge. Let us help them to the limit in their effort for further professional training in this field or any other field in which training is needed.

We best serve our own interests as administrators and as colleges and the farmer's interest when we best serve the interests of extension agents and provide ways for their professional improvement and advancement.



